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THE DRAMAS OF RICHARD CUMBERLAND, 1779-1785

Richard Cumberland's sentimental masque, *Calypso*, was acted March 20, 1779, at Covent Garden Theatre. This play tells a moral tale of the struggle of Telemachus to resist Calypso. On a "rocky shore, wild and desart," (I, i) Calypso mourns Ulysses, and even Proteus can give no news of the wanderer. Telemachus is wrecked upon the island, and, despite the protests of Mentor, yields to Calypso. He is moved to repentance by discovering the real wickedness of Calypso, and, with the moral awakening of Telemachus, the palace of Calypso vanishes. "The plot," as *Biographia Dramatica* (III, 77) says, "is well known to every school boy and girl who has read Telemachus," and "the adventures of Telemachus, in different shapes, have already surfeited the world. Opera, masque, and Tragedy have all maintained this hero in a languishing kind of existence." Calypso was, however, effective as eighteenth-century stage-craft. "It has," says *The London Review* for March, "something in it picturesque and poetical, we wish we could say equally dramatic and theatrical; but in these points it is somewhat defective, altho' we think it by no means so deficient as our play-house and newspaper critics pretend." The prophecy of *The London Magazine* for April that *Calypso* was "not likely to outlive the nine nights that include three benefits" was true, since the masque was acted but three times. *Calypso* must be set down as one more unfortunate experiment by Cumberland in a field for which he was totally unfitted.¹

The Bondman, an adaptation of Massinger's play, was acted on October 13, 1779. It is probable that the play was offered to the world anonymously. *The Public Advertiser* of October 14 reviews it, "altered, as 'tis said, by Mr. Hall." *The Bondman* was "acted only about six nights."²

The failure of *The Duke of Milan*, acted November 10, 1779, at Covent Garden, marked Cumberland's third unsuccessful attempt

¹ Cumberland says that *Calypso* was written to bring Butler forward, *Mémoires*, I, 800. See *The Widow of Delphi*. Further comment upon *Calypso* may be found in the *St. James Chronicle* of March 23, 1779; *The London Chronicle* of March 22, 1779, and Genest, vi, 95.

² *Biographia Dramatica*, III, 64. Further comment upon *The Bondman* may be found in *The London Chronicle* of October 15, 1779; *Lloyd's Evening Post* of October 13, 1779, and in Boaden, *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, p. 117.

within two years to adapt Elizabethan tragedies. Revision of the plays of Shakespeare, of Massinger, or even of Fenton, could never result with any degree of credit to Cumberland, since he was in no sense a writer of good tragedies, nor even a capable adapter of them. Exactly what he professes in his Advertisement to *Timon of Athens* he never achieves, namely, the bringing of plays "upon the stage with less violence to their authors, and not so much responsibility on his part."³

Cumberland now turned again to musical comedy. On February 1, 1780, Covent Garden Theatre advertised *The Widow of Delphi*, or *The Descent of the Deities*. The author's powers in this species of drama had not improved. *The Widow of Delphi* was performed six times.⁴

The Walloons, written during Cumberland's sojourn in Spain as ambassador, was acted April 20, 1782, at Covent Garden. On January 28, 1783, there appeared at the same theatre *The Mysterious Husband*, a good example of eighteenth-century domestic tragedy. Lord Davenant, the villain, was played by Henderson. "Well, Mr. Cumberland," Mrs. Henderson is reported to have said, "I hope at last you will allow Mr. Henderson to be good for something on the stage." "Madam," replied the poet, "I can't afford it—a villain he must be."⁵ This was Henderson's third appearance as Cumberland's leading character in a tragedy. Certain lines in the prologue of *The Mysterious Husband* have interest as a possible allusion to *The Critic*:

Now parody has ventured all its spite
Let Tragedy resume her ancient right.⁶

³ *Memoirs*, I, 384. The prologue of *The Duke of Milan* was said to be written *en revanche* for the attack on Cumberland in *The Critic*. Further comment upon *The Duke of Milan* may be found in *Lloyd's Evening Post* of November 15, 1779.

⁴ Further comment upon *The Widow of Delphi* may be found in *The Westminster Magazine* for February, 1780; *The Town and Country Magazine* for February, 1780; *The Universal Magazine* for February, 1780; *The London Chronicle* of February 2, 1780; *The Public Advertiser* of February 1, and February 2, 1780; *Biographia Dramatica*, iv, 405, Mudford, *Life of Cumberland*, p. 341; and Genest, vi, 146.

⁵ *Life of Mrs. Siddons*, p. 229.

⁶ Further comment upon *The Mysterious Husband* may be found in *The Lady's Magazine* for February, 1783; *The Critical Review* for February,

The Carmelite, a so-called Gothic tragedy, was acted with some measure of success at Drury Lane on December 2, 1784. Mrs. Siddons won fame as Matilda. On the twenty-second of the same month appeared a sentimental comedy of Cumberland's, *The Natural Son*. The story of this piece follows: Blushenly, without name or fortune, but with all the other graces of a sentimental comedy hero, escapes the meshes of Phoebe, an elderly spinster, and wins, in spite of his diffidence, the hand of Lady Paragon. Rueful, moved to remorse by the virtues of his natural son, Blushenly, acknowledges him, and repents publicly of his wrong-doing. *The Natural Son* is sadly deficient in incident for a five-act play, and the December *Westminster Magazine* points out that "it must require a considerable husbandry to draw out so slight a fable into five acts." This fault, and Cumberland's ancient weakness of firing all his artillery in the first two acts, destroyed a promising comedy. "It has of late," says *The Universal Magazine* for the same month, "been remarkably the lot of the theatres to produce plays which began well, and sink both in interest and effect as they proceed. *The Natural Son* is a piece which comes within this description. The first and second acts are good ones, and though there are many happy incidents, excellent sentiments, and pointed witticisms and remarks in the third, fourth and fifth, yet considered as acts, they are by no means equal to those that precede them. It were to be wished that Mr. Cumberland had compressed his plot, and written the comedy in three acts only; all would then have been alive and interesting."

Cumberland, with undying belief that any "unequal production"⁷ of his, if properly cared for, would ultimately succeed, reduced the five acts of *The Natural Son* to four, and the play in this form was acted at Drury Lane on June 10, 1794. "The omissions," says *The European Magazine*, "were chiefly the exclusion of a character called Rueful, which certainly added nothing to the merit of the play. In its present state it is much improved."⁸ The worth of *The Natural Son*—and it has worth—

1783; *Aickin's Review* for 1783; Genest, vi, 268; Mudford, p. 413; Oulton, *History of the Theatres of London*, II, 2; and Dunlap, *Life of George Frederick Cooke*, I, 338, 341, 343.

⁷ *The London Chronicle*, December 25, 1784.

⁸ *The European Magazine*, June, 1794.

lies partly in "well delineated character."⁹ Cumberland was bold enough to use old wine. Major O'Flaherty re-appears, and is effective, although he lacks the wit of earlier days. "Upon the whole well contrived," is one judgment, though the same writer laments that "Major O'Flaherty throws sad disgrace on young Dudley,"¹⁰ for the votaries of the early play knew the promise that "Dudley made . . . at the conclusion of the *West Indian*,"¹¹ and now the Major is "totally unprovided for."¹² In the production of a decade later the Major's name "was changed to Captain O'Carol."¹³ *Biographia Dramatica* praises the characters of Rueful and Dumps, and *The Westminster Magazine* discerns in "Jack Husting's first interview with Sir Jeoffrey, and his address to Miss Phoebe . . . abundant humour."

The Arab, or *Alcanor*, acted March 8, 1785, at Covent Garden Theatre, has the familiar Cumberland plot: Mariamne, the former queen, having been imprisoned, the royal Augusta exults over the faded charms of her rival. Herodian, the son of Mariamne, has returned only to find his mother dethroned, while Alcanor, lost for years past in the desert, arrives as the heir-presumptive, magnificent in his simplicity, his naïveté, his fierce and generous passions. When he is made aware of the just claims of Herodian to the throne, in spite of the imprecations of Augusta, he yields the kingdom to his rival. Shortly afterwards, he learns that Glaphyra loves and is loved by Herodian. Since Alcanor has earlier saved the maiden's life, and loves her, this crisis is the supreme test of his generous nature. He wavers, sending Barzilla, who proves to be his own father, to kill Herodian, but virtue conquers, and Alcanor's suicide liberates Herodian and Glaphyra. In all likelihood, *Salome*, a lost tragedy by Cumberland, *The Arab*, as acted at Covent Garden, and *Alcanor*, as found in *The Posthumous Dramatick Works*, are successive versions of the same drama. In letters to Garrick in 1770 Cumberland describes *Salome*, and says he has made her life "twice attempted by Mariamne."¹⁴ "If yet,"

⁹ *Biographica Dramatica*, IV, 74.

¹⁰ *The Westminster Magazine*, December, 1784.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ Genest, VI, 152.

¹⁴ *Private Correspondence of David Garrick*, I, 380, Cumberland to Garrick, January 25, 1770.

he writes two months later, "the catastrophe is too shocking, by the danger in which Glaphyra is kept, I have a plan for softening that, though I am humbly of the opinion it has a very great effect as it is."¹⁵ What became of the unfortunate *Salome* it is impossible to tell, but the mention of the characters of Mariamne, Glaphyra, and Bethanor links the lost play with both *The Arab* and *Alcanor*. Mariamne appears in *Alcanor*, Bethanor in *The Arab*, and Glaphyra in both. The relationship of *The Arab* to *Alcanor* is clear. *Biographia Dramatica* does not realize that these are essentially the same play.¹⁶ Listed as separate plays, *The Arab* is said to have been never published, and *Alcanor* never performed. *Alcanor* is, in fact, a later evolution of *The Arab*. Of *The Arab's* *dramatis personæ* of five characters, two, Herodian and Glaphyra, reappear in *Alcanor*. Contemporary references to incidents of *The Arab* prove that the plots were substantially alike. "There can hardly be a doubt," says Genest of *The Arab*, "that this is the T. published in Cumberland's posthumous works as *Alcanor*."¹⁷ *The Arab* was acted but once. In the cast were Henderson, Lewis, Wroughton, Mrs. Bates,¹⁸ and Miss Young. "This tragedy," says *The London Magazine* for March, 1785, "abounds in business; some of the incidents are effected by great contrivance and ingenuity. Several of the situations are as full of force as any we have observed in tragedies of a late period. Glaphira's avowal of Herodian being her lover; the confession Bathanor¹⁹ [*sic*] makes, of his being the father of Abidah;²⁰ the interview between Herodian and Glaphira; and the death of Bathanor, deserve particular attention. The language is full of imagery, some of which possesses novelty. The tragedy was well got up, and the performers played with infinite spirit." At his last benefit Henderson²¹ acted the

¹⁵ *Idem.*, March 17, 1770.

¹⁶ *Biographia Dramatica: The Arab*, III, 35, *Alcanor*, III, 12.

¹⁷ Genest, VI, 360.

¹⁸ Mrs. Bates acted regularly at Drury Lane.

¹⁹ Bethanor = Barzilla in the play of *Alcanor*.

²⁰ Abidah = Alcanor in the play of *Alcanor*.

²¹ In the *Memoirs*, II, 207, Cumberland says: "I have now in my mind's eye that look he (Henderson) gave me, so comically conscious of taking what his judgment told him he ought to refuse, when I put into his hand my tributary guineas for the few places I had taken in his theatre: 'If I were not the most covetous dog in creation,' he cried, 'I should not take your money; but I cannot help it.'"

part of *Alcanor* with success. A friend, E. T., wrote to him: "I saw in one paper, Bensley preferred to you in Horatius. I have not seen your Horatius, but I have your *Alcanor*, and I am sure your Horatius must be good."²²

From this time on Cumberland's pen was never idle. During the Summer Season at the Haymarket Theatre was produced *The Country Attorney*. It was withdrawn after the fourth performance. Genest (VI, 452) gives the number of performances of *The Country Attorney* as four, but The Theatrical Register of *The Gentleman's Magazine* records six. The play was never printed, and Cumberland hardly mentions it in the *Memoirs* (II, 278). *The European Magazine* justly calls *The Country Attorney* "one of those hasty productions by which Mr. Cumberland has been gradually writing down his reputation, ever since the appearance of the *West Indian*."²³

STANLEY T. WILLIAMS.

Yale University.

WORDSWORTH BANDIES JESTS WITH MATTHEW

Three stanzas from Wordsworth's poem *The Tables Turned* have always held a very prominent place in the minds of all his readers. They are the following:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your Teacher.

²² *The European Magazine*, July, 1787. Further comment upon *The Country Attorney* may be found in *The Town and Country Magazine* for July, 1787; *The London Chronicle* of July 9, 1787; Adolphus, *Life of John Bannister*, I, 160; *Memoirs of Mrs. Crouch*, II, 24, 56; and Mudford, p. 547.

²³ *Letters and Poems by the late Mr. John Henderson*, p. 213, E. T. to Henderson, November 13, 1777. Further comment upon *The Arab* may be found in the *Memoirs of Mrs. Crouch*, I, 238.